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# ... and Disinformation

*"We stood for democracy in the Philippines. We have to stand for democracy in Nicaragua."*

—President Reagan

The analogy is preposterous. In Haiti and the Philippines, we withdrew our support—at last—from dictatorships we'd embraced for decades. In Nicaragua, Reagan wants us to finance a guerrilla war against the government. To subsume these two exercises under the general rubric of "intervention" is to abandon all capacity for making distinctions. Yet this is the lesson contra supporters want us to draw from the events of recent weeks.

The United States never "intervened" against Ferdinand Marcos when he still had a grip on power. Far from it. Less than a year ago, the administration was asking for a 150 percent increase in military aid to his regime. It's said now that Marcos was completely out of touch with reality by the end. But who can blame him for thinking that Washington wouldn't begrudge him a little stolen election? Who can suppose that the United States would have given him the push if the Filipinos themselves hadn't forced our hand? As for Nicaragua, if all Reagan proposed was offering Daniel Ortega a free plane ride out and a safe haven for his collection of designer sunglasses, few would object.

Even as they draw a fatuous parallel with Nicaragua, conservative distinction-makers are working overtime to explain why the lessons of the Philippines don't apply to more obvious places such as South Korea and South Africa, where we continue to hope that "quiet diplomacy" and "constructive engagement" will do the trick.

According to the Washington Times, administration officials have "hinted strongly that the Marxist Sandinista government is employing subtle methods to manipulate press reports on Nicaragua." Subtle methods, the bounders! No one can accuse the administration of subtle methods in its campaign for contra aid.

The reference to "subtle methods" concerns a document outlining an alleged Sandinista "disinformation campaign" against contra aid. The administration has made a great to-do about this classified document. But it won't release it. Nevertheless, Reagan officials have been sharing the contents with friendly journalists.

So what does the mystery document say? A "senior administration official" summarizes: "What you have here is a Communist government, allied to the Soviet Union, undertaking a very well-organized effort, with the help of certain Americans, to change a vote in Congress." You mean, like the Marxist government in Angola hiring Reagan's buddy Robert Gray for \$50,000 a month to lobby against aid to the rebels in Angola? Something like that? Hot stuff. The notion that there's something illicit about a foreign government enlisting sympathetic Americans in an effort, organized or otherwise, to affect legislation will be news to supporters of Israel, among others.

Much of Reagan's own campaign for contra aid might be called "disinformation" if the deceptions weren't so transparent. The administration clings to the fiction that the part of its proposed aid that isn't actually going to buy weapons is in some sense "humanitarian"—a phony distinction that was invented by American fund-raisers for the Irish Republican Army.

The administration also still claims that its goal is "a negotiated settlement" (Secretary of State Shultz, March 3), though asking Reaganites what the Nicaraguan government could negotiate short of its own demise produces nothing but winks.

My favorite logical contortion is how administration supporters explain away the fact that all the major Latin American nations oppose the contra war: they secretly support it, you understand, but they're afraid to say so, for fear of the Sandinistas' wrath.

Let's see, now. American right-wingers can divine these leaders' true desire, and report it in the newspapers, but the Sandinistas remain hoodwinked? Or the Sandinistas, although bent on regional conquest, will give any country a pass whose leaders demur to say publicly what they are known to think privately? And the Latin leaders are so sure the Sandinistas are obsessed with this rather fine point that they will risk losing American support for the contra campaign that they actually—secretly—think is essential to their survival? Please.

Support for the contras is one of the rare issues where President Reagan will have to change the public's mind if he wants to get his way. Reagan's vaunted "leadership" has consisted, by and large, of leading people where

they already want to go. But there is no national support for starting a war in Nicaragua. Supporters of contra aid portray the opposition as a timorous liberal elite, paralyzed by Vietnam. In fact, the contra campaign itself is almost entirely a creation of elite opinion. A higher quality of disinformation will be required to change that.

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